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THE DISPLACEMENT OF EAST TEXAS IN MOVIES ABOUT TEXAS

by Don Graham

Just as certain prominent sages of Texas culture, chiefly J. Frank Dobie and Walter P. Webb, have created a largely western image of Texas through their writings and public personas, so too have motion pictures traded upon the idea of Texas as a western state, a barren, dry, desert-like land populated by long-legged galoots on horseback. The co-efficient of this stereotype has been the neglect and misrepresentation of East and Coastal Texas in movies about the state.

From the beginning of films about Texas, the state has been seen as essentially a western landscape.¹ This is true of the first fictional narrative to deal with Texas, called, appropriately, *Texas Tex*, in 1908, and of the numerous Tom Mix films from 1900 to 1920. Other silent films such as *North of 36* and *The Wind* continued the pattern, though it is true that in *North of 36*, filmed on location on a ranch thirty miles from Houston, the trees are festooned with Spanish moss. In the scads of B Westerns in the 1920s and 1930s, Texas was always the Wild West, never the Old South. In these films, west was west, and east was west, too.

Even in more sophisticated eras, the tendency to see Texas through western lenses is a hard habit to break. Horton Foote, a Texas-born novelist, playwright, and prize-winning screenwriter, spoke to this matter of cliché versus authenticity when he visited Austin in January 1984 to attend a film conference on Texas movies. He told how in 1966, a big, splashy production of his novel *The Chase* falsified his home town of Wharton by including one scene with a couple of Indians in full tribal regalia. The Indians were inserted to provide a little local color. Foote protested, pointed out that there were no Indians in Wharton during his lifetime, but the Hollywood people, their ideas shaped by previous films about Texas, knew better. In any case, it was too late to get the Indians out anyway; the scene had already been shot.

When films were set ostensibly in East Texas, one of two things usually happened. Either the film made East Texas into West Texas, or it blurred East Texas into the Old South, and the sense of Texas was lost or ignored. Examples of the westernization of East Texas are plentiful. In *American Empire* (1942) Richard Dix operates a gigantic ranch along the Sabine River, just a few miles from the Louisiana border. Yet his ranch is surrounded by lofty, snow-clad mountains, the high Sierras. In the biopic of Sam Houston, *Man of Conquest* (1938), Richard Dix's Houston rides through rugged western terrain in East Texas, and in one scene discovers a gooey black liquid that oozes from the ground. He sets it on fire and drives off a band of marauding Indians. In another founding-father film, *The First*

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Texan (1956), Joel McCrea as Houston leads the Texan army towards San Jacinto, and on all sides stretch the bare, treeless expanses of Southern California, with soft, nude hills rising in the distance. Similar Western landscapes appear in *The Man from the Alamo* (1953), a film based loosely upon the Moses Rose legend.

In later films one finds exactly the same misrepresentation of East Texas settings as in the earlier Westerns. In *All the Fine Young Cannibals* (1960), for instance, Natalie Wood plays a young girl from East Texas who yearns to escape from her impoverished, redneck, fundamentalist background and live the good life in Dallas or New York. She boards a train in Dallas headed for New York and, amazingly, passes through a desert replete with miles of sand, giant cacti, and shimmering vistas of heat. If one accepts the geography of this film, it is clear that the train took the long route — through Arizona. An equally laughable westernizing of East Texas occurs in *A Walk on the Wild Side* (1962). Here, Laurence Harvey, with his usual lack of believability, plays an East Texas farmer. On the way to New Orleans, Harvey gets off a train in the middle of a desert. Yet a sign beside the railroad track says, "Beaumont, One Mile." A tumbleweed blows past. Are there tumbleweeds in the Beaumont area? Only in the movies.

In *Four for Texas* (1964), a truly dreadful film starring Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin, Galveston is portrayed as next door to the high Sierras. As a final example of East Texas as Arizona desert, Burt Reynolds' second *Smokey and the Bandit* opus will do. One of those interminable car chases brings the Bandit from cool, lush Louisiana into hot, dusty, barren Texas. The change is instantaneous, taking place the moment Burt crosses the state line.

All of these films traffic in an extreme stereotype of Texas landscapes. In each, Texas looks the way it does when Elizabeth Taylor steps down from the train in *Giant*: vast, empty, dusty, flat, and windy. Of course, the part of Texas where *Giant* was filmed — Marfa near the Big Bend country — looks like that. East Texas does not, but Hollywood has never noticed the difference.

The second thing that happens when a film is set in East Texas is also curious. East Texas merges into the Deep South, and all sense of a Texas different from the western stereotype is lost. *Home From the Hill* (1960), set in Clarksville and based upon William Humphrey's novel, is usually described in film guides as a movie about a "Southern family." But surely the best example of this phenomenon is Jean Renoir's *The Southerner* (1945). Based on George Sessions Perry's prize-winning novel, *Hold Autumn in Your Hand*, *The Southerner* shifts the focus from a Texas sharecropper to a generic Southern agrarian hero. What would a title such as *The Texan* have suggested? The answer is easy: it would have evoked a Western as naturally as the name Tom Mix did. Any audience in 1945, when *The Southerner* was released, would have felt duped if a movie

called *The Texan* failed to have a cowboy or gunfighter in it. This is precisely what happened a few years later, in 1950, when a family film made from Fred Gipson's *The Home Place* was mistitled *Return of the Texan*. The title frustrated audience expectations and led studio head Daryl F. Zanuck to caution director Delmer Daves to stick to the genre model of the Texas movie: "If you go to Texas, go on a horse with a gun."²

There are very few farm movies set anywhere in Texas, but one that should be mentioned in the East Texas context is *The Green Promise* (1949). Legendary Houston oil man Glenn McCarthy produced this film and premiered it at the opening of the Shamrock Hotel in 1949. *The Green Promise* is undisguised propaganda for the 4-H Clubs and features one of the sickest, most unlikable fathers ever seen on film, played by Walter Brennan. The 4-H program stands for the enlightened application of scientific farming methods; good, clean competition; and other positive social attitudes. Brennan's character, a vain, over-protective father and an ignorant despoiler of the land, resists reason and science right up until the end of the film.

Although one might think that the oil boom would be reflected in movies about East Texas, here again the Western preference dominates. The silent film, *Flowing Gold* (1922), is set in West Texas; *Boom Town* (1940) is set in the Burkburnett fields; *Giant* (1956), of course, is thoroughly western in imagery; *The Wheeler Dealers* (1963), ninety percent of which takes place in New York, opens in typical desert country; and the most recent oil film, *Waltz Across Texas* (1982), was filmed on location in the Midland area. Only *Written on the Wind* (1956), the lurid melodrama starring Rock Hudson and Dorothy Malone, is set, albeit vaguely, in the East Texas oil fields.

While East Texas is always getting erased or redefined into trans-Pecos country, there is one strange example of the opposite process that should be mentioned. This is the sad story of what happened to Larry McMurtry's second novel, *Leaving Cheyenne*, when it fell into the hands of director Sidney Lumet. McMurtry himself was both bemused and appalled at how his story of modern-day cowboys living in the Archer City area got derailed. Titled *Lovin' Molly* (1974), the film was shot in Bastrop, east of Austin. The countryside there is greener, more lush than the country around Archer City, and even worse, McMurtry's cowboys were transformed into clodhoppers. They wear flat shoes, overalls instead of jeans, and plaid shirts with big squares, the kind one sees in TV commercials about lusty lumberjacks downing a case of Coors Light after a hard day of deforestation activity. The entire western flavor of McMurtry's work was lost. In one sense McMurtry deserves such treatment, given his own deep-seated bias against East Texas, as strong in its own way as J. Frank Dobie's.

By now one might legitimately wonder if there are any good films about East Texas. The answer is yes, but chances are few Texans have

seen them. The best East Texas films are *Leadbelly* (1976) and three short films by Texan Ken Harrison. *Leadbelly* is a feature film directed by black writer and filmmaker, Gordon Parks. The film is beautifully photographed and gives an authentic account of the famous blues singer's struggle from cotton fields to night clubs in "Deep Ellum" and to his years in the Huntsville penitentiary. For some reason, the film lacks the necessary energy or spark to lift it above the merely pictorial. Still, some scenes, especially those at the prison farm, are compelling. Filmed at various sites in East Texas, all the settings are genuine.

Though less well known than *Leadbelly*, Ken Harrison's films are superior works, are indeed the best pictures of life in East Texas that movies have thus far provided. My two favorites are *Mr. Horse* (1976) and *Hannah and the Dog Ghost* (1979). *Last of the Caddoes* (1979), from William Humphrey's short story, seems more literary and less interesting. *Mr. Horse* is about as grim a portrait of life as appears in any Texas film. The story traces the last days of a widower living alone on an isolated piece of land somewhere in East Texas. His son and daughter-in-law and their two bratty children pay him a visit on their way to Carlsbad Caverns for a vacation. The time is 1957. Though the old man is quite content where he is, his son and daughter-in-law want to sell the farm and put the old man in a rest home. To them, he's a millstone. They pretend to worry about his well-being, but their real motive is to remove him from their responsibility. They would not mind the profit from selling the farm, either. The contrasting values of the two generations are realized strongly in these scenes. The old man is loyal to a vanishing rural way of life, while the son and family rush headlong into a tacky, consumer-oriented, middle class suburban future. Another conflict occurs between the old man and three pre-teenage hoodlums from a nearby town. They ride their bikes on his property, which he doesn't mind, and they pester him in a threatening way. In a small lake on his land they go swimming and, pretending that one has drowned, lead the old man into the lake to retrieve the body. The old man drowns in a scene ambiguous enough to suggest suicide. To *Mr. Horse*, dying is better than being immured in a rest home or tormented by thoughtless kids.

Harrison's second film, *Hannah and the Dog Ghost*, is entirely different in character, mood, and theme, but the setting is the same, the beautiful woods and grassy hills of some isolated countryside in East Texas. Based on a tale drawn from folklorist J. Mason Brewer's *Dog Ghosts and Other Texas Negro Folk Tales*, *Hannah and the Dog Ghost* is a lyrical, haunting evocation of folklore in film. A black mother's child is stolen by the devil in the guise of a fiddlerman; and the action, most of it wordless, concerns the young mother's efforts to reclaim her stolen son. That's all there is. The film's great achievement is to lend dignity and authenticity to the mother's quest. But then dignity and authenticity are not easy qualities to achieve in film, or in any art form for that matter.

What does the future hold for the portrayal of East Texas in movies?

Given the expedient nature of filmmaking and the long-standing traditions that have been noted, moviegoers have probably not seen the last of mountains near Galveston or barren desert near Longview. Indeed, several recent examples show the persistence and strength of the false stereotypes, and TV stands ready to reinforce all the old clichés as well.³ *Uncommon Valor*, released just before Christmas in 1983, illustrates beautifully the sturdiness of the phony. Early in the film, a paramilitary unit of ex-Viet Nam combat veterans goes into secret training for a mission to Thailand to rescue P.O.W.'s written off by the U.S. Government. The training camp is situated in a valley surrounded by high mountains, and we are told solemnly that this location is "north of Galveston." How far north, one wonders, Colorado? Canada?

In television shows, the same phenomenon repeats itself. A 1983 episode of *Magnum, P.I.* dealt with a good old boy from Waco, and in a few scenes we were taken to the g.o.b.'s ranch back home in Texas. And what a ranch it was! Lofty mountains in the distance, broad flat prairie, brown and desert-like under the sun, in all a perfectly splendid West Texas setting lensed in Southern California. Then, of course, there is TV's *Dallas*, still mythically redefining Collin County into Western ranching country, an old Southern agrarian world vanished, replaced by wheeler-dealers, ranchers, and the assorted Ewing louts.

Even so, the future may hold better opportunities for honest portrayals of East Texas in the movies. With the continued growth of the film industry in Texas, we may expect some truthful dramas. *Tender Mercies* (1983) is a hopeful sign. It tells the story without clichés of a country-western singer on the skids — a small miracle. And it won two Oscars! One of the key ingredients of *Tender Mercies* is its absolutely fidelity to place. It represents location shooting, regional filmmaking, at its best. In this vein, all moviemakers dealing with Texas materials should heed the words of Anna Thomas, one of the makers of the acclaimed *El Norte* (1983). Thomas speaks thus of the importance of location filming: "I've always believed in the voodoo of locations: if you shoot in the right places, the actors absorb the atmosphere and it becomes part of the performance."⁴ Working with this principle in mind, moviemakers, even ones shooting deep in the Piney Woods or in the Caddo Lake area, might be able to redefine the Texas movie landscape to include, at last, East Texas as part of the Lone Star map.

NOTES

¹For a full account of the image of Texas in the movies, see Don Graham, *Cowboys and Cadillacs: How Hollywood looks at the Movies* (Austin, 1983).

²Delmer Daves Collection, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University.

³For another approach to this subject, see Don Graham, "Nowhere Else But Southfork," *Texas Humanist*, 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1983), pp. 10-12.

⁴Roger Ebert, "Odyssey to El Norte," *Mother Jones*, (February/March 1984) IX, p. 31.